

The Minnie Evans Sculpture Garden



Presented By:
Airlie Gardens

Adapted By:
Kelly Bryan & Carlton Sellers
From
"The Living Image of Minnie" By Fred Wharton

History of Minnie Evans

Born December 12, 1882 in Pender County, Minnie Eva Jones became one of Wilmington's noted African-American visionary artists. She attended school until the 6th grade, when she dropped out of school to be a sounder, selling oysters and clams door-to-door for \$2.50 per week.

In 1908, Minnie Jones married Julius Evans. By 1915 the Evans' family had expanded to include three sons. Elisha Dyer, David Barnes, and George Sheldon Evans were named after friends of their father's employer, Mr. Pembroke Jones.

Minnie Evans became employed by Pembroke and Sadie Jones as a domestic at Pembroke Park. In 1948, she worked as the Corbett family gatekeeper for Airlie Gardens from March to September. At this time Mrs. Evans began drawing and painting, which lasted for the next 40 years of her life. As a visionary and self-taught artist, she began selling her work from the gatehouse to visitors of the gardens.

Minnie Evans' work has been exhibited in Wilmington at local galleries and in New York. Today Mrs. Evans' work can be viewed in Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., various museums, and even in the White House Gallery. Some of her highly prized paintings and drawings can be found at the Louise Wells Cameron Museum here in Wilmington and in private collections throughout the world.

To locals and visitors, Minnie Evans' works shows unique artistic interpretation of the gardens and her life in the gardens. Her life ended in 1987, when she was 95 years old.



Creation of the Sculpture Garden

In an often-quoted interview, Minnie Evans revealed that from her earliest childhood, she had been troubled by dreams and visions of encounters with angels. In her early forties, an angel appeared to her and asked, "Why don't you paint or die?" God and the angels inspired her to paint elaborate gardens. Her paintings became figurative representations of the eternal garden of paradise. Some of the most salient images of Evans' work are lush flowers and foliage; swans, butterflies and birds; and images echoing Airlie's statuary—the lions echoing the lion's gate, or the heron-like figures echoing the Pan figures at the

pergola.

An inspired decision to create the Minnie Evans Memorial Sculpture Garden led to a garden within a garden, near the very place where she worked as a gatekeeper, where she experienced her visions, and where she created her garden-inspired art.

The tribute garden honors Minnie Evans with an astounding array of sculptures using motifs and imagery from her work. The centerpiece of the garden is a structure sculpted from bottles, cement and chicken wire by Virginia Wright-Frierson, a local artist whose proposal for an outdoor "chapel" won the unanimous approval of the NC Arts

Council, Airlie Gardens and the Cameron Art Museum. To create a fitting memorial, vibrant with the rich symbolism and elaborate designs found in Minnie Evans' work, Ms. Wright-Frierson assembled a team of North Carolina artists to interpret the artist's themes in various media. Flowers, faces, birds, angels all make dramatic appearances in the bottle house and along the path leading to it.



The Artists of the Sculpture Garden

Virginia Wright-Frierson

Virginia Wright-Frierson was the artist unanimously chosen to lead the project, and her inspiration is utterly true to Minnie Evans' legacy. Her overall design understands the garden language of Airlie, echoes both garden and religious themes, and creates with her own centerpiece—the "Bottle Chapel"—a memorial to Minnie Evans' art.



Born in Washington D.C. and raised in Long Island, Wright-Frierson first came to North Carolina as an art student to UNC-Greensboro, where she met her husband, Dargan Frierson. The couple has two children who echo their parents' career choices exactly: a Princeton math Ph.D. son and an art student daughter.

The Bottle-House grew in conception from a modest-sized house, to a 16-foot-high commemorative chapel. For almost a year, Wright-Frierson worked all day, everyday in all weather conditions on her creation.

Two walls represent the huge wings of a butterfly; two adjoining walls with head-dressed faces; the front wall exhibits two trees on either side of a rainbow arch with a pair of angel wings above.

Dumay Gorham, III

Dumay Gorham, III, a Wilmington native, fashioned two copper angels to flank the bottle house chapel. One swooping downwards, while the other can be seen swinging in while playing a trumpet. Both are modeled after Minnie Evans' paintings.



After design school and working for a local product design firm, Gorham decided that he was most comfortable creating in three dimensions. While most of his pieces are displayed in private homes, some of his notable pieces are on permanent displays in public areas: UNCW's Marine Science Center lobby, the Arboretum, Kiva Grill, and the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher.

Hiroshi Sueyoshi

At the entrance to the garden, Minnie Evans looks out from her gatehouse in a clay memorial sculpted by Hiroshi Sueyoshi, who also crafted a colorful ceramic fountain further along the path.

A Japanese-born and trained ceramicist, Sueyoshi has worked in Wilmington for the last 26 years, teaching at Cape Fear Community College and exhibiting his work around North Carolina. His more intimate works of bowls, figurines, and vases, can be found world-wide.



Sueyoshi created the idea and design of the gatehouse in nine stages out of the local "blue" clay. The bright palate of the fountain in the garden shows two sides of Minnie Evans' striking portraits of females' faces wearing elaborate headdresses.

Michael Van Hout

Michael Van Hout contributed copper birds to compliment the copper tree "planted" inside the Bottle House. Growing up as a typical "army brat," Van Hout graduated from high school in Fayetteville and took years to decide that he would graduate from UNC Greensboro, majoring in studio art and sculpture. His work is permanently featured throughout local public attractions.



Perched on top of the arched portal of the bottle-house itself, the birds were cast in copper and finished in indus-

trial patinas. Van Hout designed them to weather and very gradually turn green, like the tree itself, to merge the birds into the landscape.

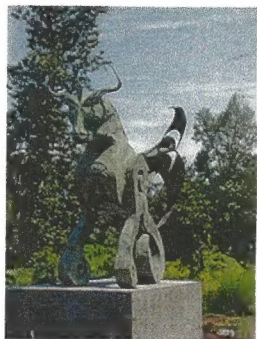
Karen Crouch

Karen Crouch created the copper mythical beast-statue that guards the entry to Airlie Gardens, as well as the copper "tree" within the Bottle House.

Crouch began her career as a trial lawyer. She was introduced to welding by a friend and quickly began to exhibit works at the Simmons Wright Gallery. The Sculpture Garden is her first major public commission.

The beast-figure, reflects Minnie Evans' "funny green animal." Crouch completed the beast in little more than a year. It was then displayed at Cameron Museum and then in the Acme Gallery. The completion of the beast was official when it was bolted down on its platform at Airlie. Sitting alone at the gatehouse, Mrs. Crouch's serene "beast" echoes Minnie Evans' own solitary vigil at the gatehouse.

The "tree" began simply as a ridgepole within the Bottle House, but the Airlie committee decided that the Bottle House needed internal reinforcement to withstand tropical storms. Crouch welded the tree and bark design into the copper plates. The copper tubing around the tree is all recycled courtesy of Southern Metals and Recycling. Crouch sees both pieces as being true to Minnie Evans' spirit.



Barbara Sullivan

Barbara Sullivan collaborated with many other gardeners on a garden design that provides the perfect outdoor gallery space for visitors to discover the spirited imagination of Minnie Evans in the sculptures inspired by her life and work.

After years of being a lawyer with her husband, Michael Murchison, Sullivan began doing research on horticulture. Her book, *Garden Perennials for the Coastal South*, was published by UNC Press one year prior to her completion of the garden.

Sullivan was successful in her role to unobtrusively frame the garden's sculpture. Her landscape, as all plantings are, is inevitably a work-in-progress, as her plants establish themselves and grow to a full harmony with the art they frame.

Tejuola Turner

Tejuola Turner, celebrated gourd artist, created triangular garden seats for a quiet spot. Born in Detroit, her original background was in commercial art after receiving a degree in retail advertising at Columbus College of Art and Design in 1978. Soon, a friend introduced her to gourd carvings. This became her primary artistic outlet. Today, the Cameron Art Museum permanently displays examples of her gourd art.

For the Minnie Evans Garden concrete seat-sculptures, Turner embarked on extensive research into concrete mixes and dyes. She chose designs that both echoed her own interest in swirling forms and of Minnie Evans' frequent use of swirl-motifs. The result creates energetic movement and relieves the otherwise static and geometrical concrete forms.



Brooks Koff

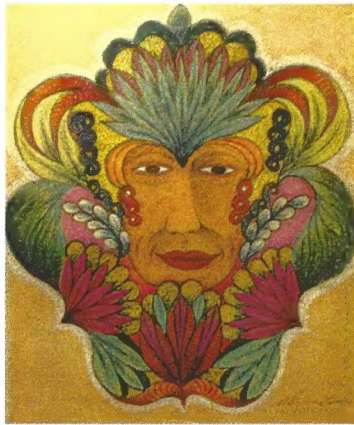
Flanking the Bottle-House like stepping-stones, but also creating its spiral floor and retaining wall, is a series of large tiles created by Brooks Koff.



The sister of Michael Van Hout (another sculpture garden contributor), Koff also grew up an "army brat," but graduated from UNC Greensboro with a degree in nursing. When her daughter reached third-grade at New Horizons School, Koff volunteered at the school as an art teacher using Minnie Evans' works as models for her art instruction.

Children from New Horizons, the Brigade Boys and Girls Club, Dreams of Wilmington, and the Friends' School, were divided into teams that created the initial designs in pencil, chose the colors, and finally cut the actual patchwork of thin glass mosaic that forms the surface of the concrete stepping stones and tiles. Koff is satisfied by the idea that these children are now invested in the magic of the Sculpture Garden.





Special Thanks To:

The Friends & Family of Minnie Jones Evans
Airlie Gardens Foundation
Royce and Sylvia Angel
NC Arts Council
Boone Masonry
Cameron Art Museum Docents
Cape Fear Garden Club
Great Oaks Garden Club
Marapese Masonry Inc.
New Horizons School
Dreams of Wilmington
Brigade Boys and Girls Club
Charmaine Lopez
The Friends School
Marshall Osband
Ken Weeden and Associates
Wilmington Senior Mens Club
New Hanover County

Photos Contributed By:

Dargan Frierson
Duane Angstadt
Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum



Sculpture Garden Artists:

Virginia Wright-Frierson

Karen Crouch

Dumay Gorham

Brooks Koff

Hiroshi Sueyoshi

Barbara Sullivan

Tejuola Turner

Michael Van Hout